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APPLYING RESEARCH FINDINGS IN COMPREHENSION TO CLASSROOM PRACTICE.

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AN ADDRESS FOR CLASSROOM TEACHERS IS PRESENTED WHICH CONSIDERS THE NATURE OF COMPREHENSION AND THE PROCESSES INVOLVED IN TEACHING CHILDREN TO COMPREHEND WHAT THEY READ. A REVIEW OF THE RESEARCH ON COMPREHENSION SINCE 1960 IS GIVEN. THE FOLLOWING TOPICS ARE DISCUSSED--THE PROCESS OF COMPREHENDING, THE KINDS OF COMPREHENSION, THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COMPREHENSION AND CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT, AND THE PLACE OF WORD PERCEPTION IN COMPREHENSION. SOME APPLICATIONS OF WHAT IS KNOWN ABOUT COMPREHENSION TO CLASSROOM PROCEDURES ARE SUGGESTED. THIS PAPER WAS PRESENTED AT THE INTERNATIONAL READING ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE (SEATTLE, MAY 4-6, 1967). (RH)

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"Children don't comprehend what they read!" is becoming an increasing complaint among today's competent teachers. Since the perplexity without doubt can be channelled to lack of knowledge and practice, it appears the professionals who educate teachers need to inquire of themselves: (1) Do we, as students of reading, understand the process of teaching children to comprehend? (2) Are those who educate teachers knowledgeable of the research findings in the area of comprehension? and (3) Do students of reading possess the know-how to apply the significant research findings in comprehension to classroom practice? It is my intent this morn to examine each of these queries.

COMPREHENSION: A DEFINITION

To teach children to comprehend one must understand the process of comprehending. Perhaps a definition is necessary. Yet, in arriving at a definition, a definitive explanation or a conceptualization of the process of comprehending, he who teaches comprehension must recognize the involvement of a great variety of behaviors. Of the many behaviors some are: observing and [illegible], experiencing a felt problem or task, locating and defining the difficulty, utilizing past knowledge and experience, [illegible]

outcomes for solutions, verifying solutions in thought, as well as concluding and taking action after solutions have been made. However, regardless of the behavior or behaviors exhibited, there are three common components present in any behavior that takes place, namely experience (the material needed for comprehending), thinking (the process of comprehending), and language (the product needed to communicate what has been comprehended). Although these three component parts are unequivocably imperative to any proposed definition, a professional must perform two tasks before making judgments or suggestions: (1) he must review and determine the worthiness of the research that has been completed in comprehension, and (2) he must outline the experiences of educational practitioners who have been successful in utilizing with their children "the known" about comprehension.

WHAT RESEARCH HAS SAID SINCE 1960

Two research projects have been completed reviewing the research in READING COMPREHENSION. The first study "Research in Reading Comprehension from 1900-1960" was reported in 1963 by Barbara Binkley Maestle under the direction of James W. Becker, The Graduate School, Millersville State College, Millersville, Pennsylvania. The Maestle-Becker Study has been currently updated by the Walsh-Wolfe Study, "Reading Comprehension 1960-1966, a study completed in April 1967 by John J. Walsh under the direction of Josephine B. Wolfe, The Graduate School, University of Scranton, Scranton, Pennsylvania. A Compilation of studies totaled one hundred nineteen (119). Of all the studies completed from 1900-1966, forty-two (42) were considered valid and seventy-seven (77) were considered invalid

when using the criteria listed below:

1. the definition and restriction of the experimental factor
2. the control of the pupil factors
3. the control of important non-experimental factors
4. the accuracy and validity of measures of differences in achievement
5. the justification of the generalizations

Of course, the need for such studies is appreciable and useful to teachers and students of reading. Any attempt to collect, to examine, and to analyze research findings in reading comprehension is valuable for classroom practice, for designing, for developing and/or for examining Reading Programs within a school as well as Teacher Education Programs which involve the preparation of reading teachers.

Of the forty-two (42) studies considered as studies of worth and value to teachers, each was categorized into five (5) specific classifications. Five (5) were related to comprehension and motivation, twelve (12) were related to comprehension and method, nine (9) were related to comprehension and physical components, nine (9) were related to comprehension and material, five (5) were related to comprehension and format of material, and two (2) were related to comprehension and vocabulary. But, to possess knowledge is one thing, to place it in practice is another! Therefore, it is imperative that we use "the known."

USING WHAT IS KNOWN

There are four phases of "the known" with which the classroom teacher should be informed: (1) the process of comprehending, (2) the kinds of comprehension, (3) the relationship between comprehension and concept development, and (4) the place of word

perception in comprehension.

The Process

The process of comprehending involves the ability to understand language in its total sense. In fact, a classroom teacher cannot deny that comprehension is not a complex process. As everyone knows who communicates, the efficiency of transferring ideas from writer to reader is seldom high for the following reasons:

1. the reader must rely on the printed symbols ONLY. He does not have the advantage of knowing the additional meanings the writer may have intended to employ through the use of personal factors such as the writer's voice, his facial expressions, and his gestures. Therefore, the reader must create his own images and understandings.
2. there is an unavoidable variation in what readers may comprehend because of the differences in background as well as the mental processes among readers and teachers.
3. the reader may experience inaccuracies due to improper word perception, mistaken word meanings, strange differences in sentence structure, inaccurate implications, and lack of practical knowledge in applying his experiences to cultural standards.

Teachers must also know the three components of comprehension and be able to apply each to classroom practice. For example:

1. A teacher always must be mindful that experience gives meaning to language. Just as the writer lends his experiences and ideas to his writing symbols, so do readers lend their experiences

and ideas to the printed symbols. Therefore, teachers must assume the responsibility of equipping each child with the appropriate experiences for the material he is reading. In other words, "the teacher must begin with the experiences of the child and build his experiences to the material he is to read."

2. A teacher must recognize that thinking is the most important component in teaching children to comprehend. Teaching children to think is not easy. It involves too many high level elements such as the acquisition, organization and use of experiences. Following this these experiences must be evaluated and applied to solving the problem at hand." Thus, teaching children to think becomes no small task!

3. A teacher must never fail to remember that without language, the third component part of comprehension, children are unable to communicate what they comprehend. Unless children are able to express verbally what they think, full understanding and comprehension cannot be expected.

The Kinds of Comprehension

There are four basic kinds of comprehension with which all teachers should be familiar, teachers who teach children and teachers who teach teachers. Then, in addition to the four kinds of comprehension, teachers should know the specific skills that are included in the program for studying each area of basic comprehension.

The most commonly taught [redacted] comprehension is assimilative (factual) comprehension which involves the use of some ten (10) skills. The next area of comprehension given major consideration by teachers is critical (inferential) comprehension. This area of comprehension is usually considered the most difficult of all kinds to teach because it requires greater depth of perception than the others. According to current research studies in comprehension, there are twenty-One (21) specific skills in the area of critical comprehension. Next, a third classification of skills, equal in importance to critical comprehension, is organizational comprehension. This type of comprehension includes such skills as observing the sequence of ideas about what is read, interpreting charts and graphs as well as understanding and using the parts of a book. Included in this particular area are twelve (12) specific skills to be learned and used. Finally, we look at the last classification of comprehension skills, those involving the reading-study area. Although it is listed as last in this paper, it is by no means less in importance because there are more specific skills to be taught and used in this area of comprehension than in any other area. In fact, there is a total of twenty-five (25). Thus, it is evident that teaching children to comprehend the printed symbol is no small professional endeavor! However, since there is a direct relation of comprehension to concept development, teaching comprehension can become a stimulating experience in classrooms at all levels.

The Relationship Between Comprehension and Concept Development

Concept development is basic to comprehension. The reasons are

three-fold. (1) If a reader has the appropriate concepts that are basis to understanding the symbols he is to interpret, comprehension will take place with ease. (2) If a reader understands the appropriate concepts of a selection before he reads the selection, he will experience a minimum number of word recognition difficulties. Of course, it is an unequivocably known fact that loss in word recognition leads to loss in comprehension. (3) If a reader understands the appropriate concepts of a selection prior to his reading the particular selection, he usually will develop broader concepts and/or new concepts as a result of his reading. Therefore, since the building of concepts must be considered a pre-requisite to comprehension, teachers must know how concepts can be built.

First, concepts are built basically upon concrete (actual) experiences. When vicarious experiences are used to build a concept, children must be taught that experiences should be related to concrete experiences if meaning is expected to be associated with a new printed word. Secondly, a reader must be taught how to organize his experiences. For example:

> A child may have been on a boat, in a car, on an airplane and on a train, yet he may not understand the concept of transportation.

Thirdly, a reader must be taught to recognize the levels of concepts he will experience as he reads, low level concepts and high level concepts as well as the existing variations between each. For example:

> A child may understand that milk is white, is something he drinks, is a liquid, is a nutritious liquid, and is a food.

Lastly, regardless of grade levels, book levels, or content areas, a teacher must recognize and adhere to the fact that they must begin in terms of a reader's experiences. For example:

> It is difficult for a reader to understand the phrase, "Mary's home," if the reader does not have full experience with the word "home."

After this discussion, one might ask, "What about word perception?" Of course, any student of reading would be dilatory not to acknowledge the area of word perception and its importance to comprehending the printed symbol.

Word Perception: Its Importance to Comprehension

Although the ability to think always will receive priority when comprehending, word forms and other aids are needed by a reader if he is to receive complete conveyance of the writer's ideas. Meaningful aids helpful to a reader include such specifics as anticipating meanings from context, clues from illustrations, language patterns, phonetic "cues," and structural elements as well as the extension of word meanings by synonyms, homonyms, homographs, and words which have multiple meanings. Each, whenever present, provides the reader with an opportunity for "checking" the accuracy of his experience. Thus, it should be clearly understood that there is no single method or single device for developing comprehension. It is the use the reader makes of each method with the emphasis being on "all." Although the process of using these many aids is complicated, permit us to suggest some considerations for "helping" children in classrooms to comprehend the printed symbol.

APPLYING "THE KNOWN" TO THE CLASSROOM

Before delving into the act of teaching children to comprehend, there are pre-requisites to which the classroom teacher must be alert.

1. She must be cognisant of the number and the nature of the experiences the child possesses.
2. She must be aware of the child's ability to organise his experiences.
3. She must be knowledgeable and/or sensitive to the child's ability to think. In other words, the teacher must know whether the child is able to think in a concrete (practical) fashion.
4. She must be observant of the child's ability to listen as well as to express himself in oral and written form.

To begin where the learner is and help him to develop his fullest potential in comprehending, the classroom teacher must understand that there is a sequential development in the comprehensive process. Though there are many scans of development, let me suggest one sequence.

1. associative comprehension - This, perhaps, may represent the lowest level of comprehension, the level of immediate thought which is related to an experience.
2. concept formation - This act of comprehending represents the relation of insight to the problem or word which precedes for formulation of a definition to a problem.
3. problem solving - This is representative of the process by which a child goes from a task or a problem to a satisfying solution.

4. critical comprehension - This phase of comprehending is characterized by the judgments which are made after examination of significant facts and correlated materials.
5. concentrative comprehension - This is a depth process by which implications are made after careful examinations of significant facts and correlated materials.
6. creative comprehension - This process represents the highest level of comprehension. Here new ideas are produced, reactions to previous ideas and to the ideas of others are utilized. Problem solving is objectively directed toward a goal and more "fixed" with facts. Comprehending becomes more personal, less fixed and provides opportunity for greater insights.

Keeping the above in mind, a simple plan for helping children learn to comprehend in a scientific manner as a group or as individuals might be as follows:

1. help them to select or define a problem.
2. suggest that they "set up" hunches or guesses about the problem they select.
3. guide them in selecting procedures for solving their problems.
4. decide with them how they are going to evaluate and record the results from their "set" procedures.
5. discuss possibilities for drawing their conclusions and making their generalizations.
6. describe how their results, conclusions, and generalizations can be used as implications for further study.

Will this plan help children to think? The response from successful practitioners is an enthusiastic, "AYE" - accompanied by a preface of "musts."

TOO MANY MUSTS?

Are there too many "musts" to make the teaching of comprehension practical? Do "TOO MANY MUSTS" appear in this paper? No, I think not, if you wish to help your children apply what they learn to their own experiences, to develop other experiences from their learning, and to find the answers to the many problems they are attempting to solve. As teachers our objectives should be, "Accept the belief that there are never TOO MANY MUSTS to help our pupils become good comprehenders."